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We Need to Cut Back on the Salt

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By U.S. Navy Capt. Joseph McQuade, Naval Hospital Jacksonville Public Health Director

Whenever I see a patient in clinic, one thing I always look at is blood pressure.

In my opinion, hypertension, or high blood pressure, has become a “neglected” disease in this country. It causes one in six deaths among American adults — a rate that rose 25 percent over the past decade — and now represents the largest single risk factor for cardiovascular mortality. Former President Franklin Roosevelt himself died at the early age of 62 from uncontrolled high blood pressure.

The fact that so many Americans are at grave risk from not controlling their blood pressure should cause everyone to pause for a moment and

consider how well their own blood pressure is controlled. Ask yourself why providers always check and recheck our blood pressure when you go in to see them?

Too many people fail to give the topic the attention it deserves despite the simplicity of diagnosis, treatment, and prevention on a patient-by-patient basis. In fact, there is one factor that every person can impact on a personal level that very few are doing. Simply stated, we use too much salt and cutting back on it will dramatically decrease many people’s blood pressure.

Here are a few more detailed things that might help our population:


- Nearly 90 percent of Americans get more than the recommended 2.4 g of sodium per day (the equivalent of 6 g of salt). One study projected that cutting back on daily salt intake by 3 grams (roughly 30 percent), would prevent tens of thousands of strokes and heart attacks each year, while even a 1 gram reduction would be more cost-effective than treatment with the least expensive blood pressure medication.
- Increased potassium intake will also aid in decreasing blood pressure in patients (only 2 percent of adults get the recommended 4.7 g per day). Watermelon, cantaloupe and bananas are all good sources of potassium.

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- Physicians need greater adherence to hypertension screening and treatment guidelines. Ask your doctor if your blood pressure is well controlled. Get it down to less than 130/80!
- Health care providers need to leverage community health worker programs to include hypertension prevention and control. People need to understand the benefits of walking every night and getting rid of their salt shakers.

So watch out for the extra salt. It may be the biggest villain driving your blood pressure up and next time you reach for the table salt, think of your family, friends and loved ones and ask yourself...Is it really worth the risk?

For more information on your blood pressure, please visit the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute’s “Guide to Lowering High Blood Pressure” at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/>.

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